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AUTHOR Delano, June S.
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ABSTRACT

The effects of storytelling on the language development of kindergarten and first grade children were examined through an informal study in an ESEA Title I Program which stressed storytelling and language development. Teacher aides trained in storytelling techniques read a story to small groups of children each day. The subjects, randomly selected from two schools in the Title I Program and one school not eligible for Title I, responded to questions about three pictures. The children's responses were taped in the fall and again in the spring. An interviewer met with the children individually away from the classroom, showed each child each picture, and asked questions pertaining specifically to each of the three pictures. A comparative analysis of the responses and increases in vocabulary of Title I and non-Title I children indicated that the average amount of gain for the Title I children was greater than the average amount of gain for the non-Title I children, even though overall, the non-Title I children had greater language fluency. These results indicated that telling stories had a beneficial effect on the Title I children and it was concluded that the program should be retained as an integral part of the language program. (Author/CM)

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Effects Of Storytelling On Language Development

June S. Delano

Storytelling and early childhood are as compatible and natural a combination as anyone can imagine. "Tell me a story," requests the child. "Once upon a time....," replies the adult and all the magic of glass slippers, golden apples, fairies, princesses, and far away places of enchantment stir the imagination of each young listener....or does it?

While many children begin school with a repertoire of nursery tales and an ability to use the language of the stories in play and speech, other children start school with no or little familiarity with nursery tales and with limited ability to use language. In an ESEA Title I Program which stressed language development, and storytelling in particular, a simple, informal study was made to see if storytelling did make a difference.

Procedures

Teacher aides were given instruction in storytelling techniques by professional storytellers. They practiced the art with each other and learned ways of telling stories using props, flannel boards and puppets. Each day the aides told or read a story to small (5 or 6) groups of children. Two schools in the Title I Program and one not eligible for Title I were selected for the study. Children within the school were randomly selected. Responses to questions about three pictures were collected on a tape recorder in the fall and again in the spring. Five or six children from kindergarten and five or six children from first grade were taped in the fall. The children from this group still in the school were taped again in the spring.

The interviewer (this author) met with the children alone in a room away from the classroom. At first interviewing was done in the classroom as the

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interviewer was not familiar to the children. Everyone in the room wanted to participate. Therefore, to get a secluded interview, it was decided to use an empty room away from the classroom.

The aide brought the child to the interviews in the Title I schools. The supervisor escorted the child to the room in the non-Title I schools. The interviewer chatted informally with the child, talking about the tape recorder and demonstrating how it worked. At this point, when the child was comfortable with the interviewer, the person who brought him or her to the room said she was leaving but would be back shortly. The interviewer then showed the child each picture and asked the questions listed below.

Picture 1 shows a boy sitting with his head in his hands as he looks dreamily into space. Behind him is a misty castle. Across the bottom of the picture are toys. The questions asked were:

What's this little boy doing?

What's in the picture?

What is he thinking about?

Picture 2 shows a boy talking into a toy which could be a microphone or a walkie-talkie. The questions asked were:

What's this little boy doing?

What is he saying?

Why is he using a microphone (or whatever word the child used)?

The third picture shows Goldilocks waking up in the little bear's bed. The three bears have just discovered her in the bed and are standing at the foot of it. The questions asked were:

Do you know this story? What is it?

What's happening?

What happened before?

What's going to happen next?

Responses to Three Pictures

Picture 1.

In responding to the question "What's this little boy doing?" the Title I children gave responses literally describing the boy:

He's sitting down next by the toys.

Sitting down.

Watching T.V.

He's hearing.

Putting his hands on his cheeks.

Playing.

He's thinking.

He's listening.

He's doing like this (demonstrating).

The non-Title I children used more descriptive phrases.

He's sitting with his toys all around him.

Playing with his toys.

He's imagining.

Thinking about being a puppet.

Sitting and thinking.

A little boy going like this (demonstrates).

He looks like he's sad. He doesn't have something he wants.

Sitting boredly. (In response to the interviewer's question "what does boredly mean?" the child said, *"It means that he's bored. He doesn't want to play with his toys anymore. He's too tired and he wants to play with some friends."*)

In responding to the question "What's in the picture?" the Title I children in the fall had few responses and used generic terms such as "toys", "dancing ladies", and "man with a thing like this" (pointing to moustache), "marching men", "building". Two children didn't respond at all. In the spring the children all responded to the question and the responses were more specific: "ballet dancer", "soldier", "pirate", "moustache", "castle". Few children in the fall ventured a guess about what the little boy was thinking. Those who did said"

Playing with toys.

He's thinking about the castle.

Of the building.

He's thinking about being a queen.

In the spring, the children had similar ideas about the little boy's thinking:

If he can have all the toys.

Being one of the soldiers.

Thinking about friends.

Picture 2.

This picture, a photograph of a little boy with a microphone, elicited the least language response. However, all the children knew the nature of the microphone (walkie-talkie) to communicate with someone in another place.

To talk to people someplace else.

He's talking to this other boy and he saying why don't you come over and play with me.

Cause he can't go out.

She was out of the house talking on it.

Wants to do it so he can hear the other kids and the other kids can hear him.

To talk to a person far away.

To warn the cop.

Nearly all the children were unable or unwilling to answer "what is he saying?" In the spring a few responded:

Breaker, Breaker.

Breaker 1-9.

10-4, good buddy.

Picture 3.

Questions about the third picture, Goldilocks waking up, generated the most language of all three as well as the greatest increase between fall and spring. It was clear from the responses to "what happened before" and "what happened next" that the children knew the story and responded from internalized language rather than with memorized or rote responses. However, the story refrains were given generally intact and with the inflections of a baby, a mother and a father. The sequence of the story was remembered by all the children. The greatest variety was the word "porridge", probably the word most frequently changed in different versions and adult telling. One child called it cerridge (a combination of cereal - what porridge is? - porridge). Some said cereal, stew, breakfast, soup, and oatmeal.

The spring responses unlike the fall included more originality of response. For example:

Goldilocks is in the little baby's bed. She was fighting. She was mad cause she didn't know the three bears.

And then she's checking out the beds, laying down on them. And then they caught her in baby bear's bed.

They kicked her outside and she said, "I'm never going to come to this place again."

Goldilocks came in and took a sip of the stuff.

And then she fell asleep quite quickly.

And Goldilocks woke up and saw the three bears. And she had candy with her.

Some Conclusions

Charts I and II show an increase in vocabulary during the year with the most vocabulary and largest gain on Picture 3 for children in the Title I Program. The range of total words was 72-155 (Kindergarten - Spring) and 30-268 (First Grade - Spring). The non-Title I children had a range of total words of 76-373 (Kindergarten - Spring) and 128-327 (First Grade - Spring).

Charts III and IV tabulate the use of sentences. Again, Title I children show a gain between fall and spring. Their use of sentences, however, was generally less than the non-Title I children and one Title I child (Jerry) never responded with a complete sentence.

While Title I children showed an improvement their gain did not bring them up to the non-Title I children. Yet the average amount of gain for the Title I children was greater than the average amount of gain for the non-Title I children. Clearly, telling stories had a beneficial effect on these children and should be continued as part of their language program.

Another interesting fact that emerged from the tapes was the reluctance or inability of any child, Title I or non-Title I, to put him or herself in another's place and tell what another child was thinking (Picture 2). Piaget's egocentricism appears to be functioning here. The pre-logic child is unable to think about another child's thoughts.

KINDERGARTEN

Frequency Count

	Picture I		Picture 2		Picture 3		Total	
School A (Title I)	Fall	Spring	Fall	Spring	Fall	Spring	Fall	Spring
No Scores								
School B (Title I)								
Troy	--	37	12	15	53	103	65	155
Shawn	12	30	13	19	20	38	45	87
Greg	18	26	2	16	14	30	34	72
School C (Non-Title I)								
Francis	23	41	24	33	79	299	126	373
Becky	34	23	16	14	32	39	82	76
Josh	48	56	45	36	86	40	179	132
Laurie	38	36	20	19	35	74	93	129
Anna	20	53	46	39	44	96	110	188

FIRST GRADE

Frequency Count

School A (Title I)	Picture I		Picture 2		Picture 3		Total	
	Fall	Spring	Fall	Spring	Fall	Spring	Fall	Spring
Keith	29	104	11	21	336	143	376	268
John	14	29	22	47	40	78	76	154
Robert	14	43	16	20	55	98	85	161
Debby	7	23	1	18	16	101	24	142
School B (Title I)								
Jerry	1	14	8	11	19	5	28	30
Edell	0	13	0	4	0	18	0	35
Lorraine	15	23	5	15	34	33	54	71
Danny	0	28	0	4	0	33	0	65
School C (Non-Title I)								
Phillip	27	58	35	20	43	50	105	128
Bergit	32	48	39	26	118	253	189	327
Jedd	85	54	45	32	82	49	212	135

KINDERGARTEN

Sentences

School A (Title I)	No. of Sentences		Average Length of Sentences		Range of Length		No. of Words	
	Fall	Spring	Fall	Spring	Fall	Spring	Fall	Spring
No Scores								
School B (Title I)								
Troy	8	10	5	13	2-10	3-47	43	125
Shawn	2	6	5	9	3-4	3-15	7	43
Greg	3	11	5	5	4-6	3-14	15	51
School C (Non-Title I)								
Francis	6	39	15	8	6-53	3-37	92	325
Becky	8	6	6	6	3-10	2-11	51	38
Josh	7	9	11	10	3-37	3-25	80	88
Laurie	4	6	4	12	3-5	2-32	14	72
Anna	5	19	18	8	3-39	3-19	88	146

FIRST GRADE

Sentences

School A (Title I)	No. of Sentences		Average Length of Sentences		Range of Length		No. of Words	
	Fall	Spring	Fall	Spring	Fall	Spring	Fall	Spring
Keith	34	17	11	10	2-39	2-24	361	164
John	3	9	12	15	7-19	9-26	36	136
Robert	6	12	10	9	2-18	2-22	57	110
Debbie	1	9	4	11	4	3-22	4	101
School B (Title I)								
Jerry	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Edell	0	3	0	5	0	3-7	0	14
Lorraine	10	5	4	7	2-8	3-10	41	35
Danny	0	3	0	5	0	2-6	0	14
School C (Non-Title I)								
Phillip	9	10	9	9	4-20	3-24	77	89
Bergit	16	22	8	13	3-31	3-38	131	288
Jedd	14	12	13	7	3-49	3-18	188	89

CHART IV

Even though the Title I children made great gains throughout the year and especially with the fairy tale, their language still is not as fluent as the non-Title I child's. However, their rate of gain should encourage teachers and aides to continue telling stories to them as well as providing other language activities. "Once upon a time" may have more magic than we had dreamed.

June S. Delano

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